

# **THE RIGHT PLACE**

by  
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Book Two  
The Velvet Bridge Series  
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**SPRING, 1950**

## Chapter One

### JUDE'S HEART



The first light of day—breaking through the crack between earth and sky, spraying and splattering the enormous branches and leathery leaves of the seven ancient magnolia trees lining the east end of the property—was Jude's perfect time. She began her day early, arriving on the premises around six. On clear mornings, such as this one, she enjoyed sitting in the glider at the far edge of the patio, sipping her coffee. Quietly alone, undisturbed by the distant hum of traffic or the occasional engine starting in the neighborhood somewhere, Jude watched the sunrise, and marveled at the complex patterns of life.

Somehow, those giant magnolia trees had survived the centuries, prospering there despite the stubborn black clay, the long dry heat of Dallas summers, against all odds. In precise alignment, perfectly spaced, under the most unlikely, often intolerable, conditions, the massive old trees thrived. Blossoming, and re-blossoming, year after year, the creamy white flowers infused the air with their classic honey-sweet fragrance. Their majestic presence, their mysterious origin, was legendary. Jude Featherstone felt a kinship to those trees.

Those solitary moments of reflection were precious and fleeting, for the needs of the women and children who come to *The Right Place*—their lives shattered like glass—required her attention, her calm understanding, her gentle touch. Wise beyond her years, the twenty-year-old woman of refined substance identified with them all. She had lived in their pain, knew firsthand the helplessness of abuse and neglect, and its potential for spiritual and physical defeat. She was well acquainted with the indiscriminately crushing fist of fate.

Jude finished her coffee, her mind on Karen—the young mother of three sent to them on Friday—and hurried into the house, into the kitchen where Gayle and Laverne were preparing breakfast. At seven o'clock, the meal would be served in the over-sized dining room, which accommodated as many as twenty-four chairs around an expansive oak table in a family type setting.

By the time the director—Jude's mother, Mattie Caliber—arrived at 8:30, everyone would have eaten, the women relaxing in the living room for introductions of newcomers, instruction, and encouragement. On site, state certified teachers, guided by state mandated curriculum and requirements, tutored school age children in small but fully-equipped classrooms. Special effort was taken to keep the students on track academically during this temporary period in their lives. Closely supervised pre-schoolers played in the recreational areas located in the lower level of the sprawling, split-level home, or outdoors in the secluded back yard park protected by an impenetrable privacy fence that enclosed the sizeable property.

A cul-de-sac just off a main thoroughfare between Dallas and Rockwall Counties fronted the residence, situated on a five-acre expanse of prime real

estate. Established by Mattie Caliber, as a posthumous memorial to Samuel and Claudia Wright, *The Right Place*, grounded in the tenets of reciprocity, was founded on the Wrights' principle that there exists a natural obligation to extend a helping hand, especially to women and children in need. Presently there were five women and six children living at the sanctuary; its location and purpose carefully guarded for the safety of those it served.

Only the director's family, her attorney, and closest associates knew about *The Right Place*. Working exclusively with family services' department head, Miriam Berry, and family friend, Dr. Al Percy, the establishment provided a safe, uplifting environment where those in need could be sustained and restored, and receive the opportunity to gain control of their lives. The home, fully funded by the Wright Foundation, opened its doors two years ago last month, on April 1.

"You need some help?" Jude asked Laverne, who was filling bowls with dry cereal and placing them on the long serving counter separating the kitchen from the dining room.

"I need some milk and more sugar," Laverne said, "and silverware."

"How about juice?"

"Oh, that, too." Laverne's thin face blushed, as it always did when anyone directly engaged her in conversation. "I forgot." Diverting her eyes, she added, "Bananas. Need those, too." She was twenty-six and childless, her face as scarred from years of beatings as her fragile psyche. Into her third week at the home, this was her first day at kitchen duty.

"You're doing great, Laverne, I'll help you with the rest of the cereal." Jude gave her a wink and an encouraging smile.

"Why look at you!" Jude retrieved a jug of milk from the dairy refrigerator, and nudged Gayle playfully. "I love your new hairdo! Very flattering."

"Thanks, but I'll like it better in a couple of weeks, it's a tad too short for my liking." The large, older woman's shoulders shook in her lilting laughter. Her freckled bare arms and strong hands briskly whisked a bowl-full of eggs for omelets. Bacon sizzled on the griddle. "But it's easy! All I have to do is brush it and I'm set to go. I never have been one to fuss over myself, as you can tell!"

"Oh, Gayle, this kitchen wouldn't be the same without your beautiful face in the mornings!" Jude said.

Gayle Morrison was an exceptional cook, one of two kitchen managers; she was a trained dietician who planned every meal. Gayle had the morning shift, but was joined by Lucille Dotson, equally qualified and experienced, for the lunch preparation, after which Gayle's workday ended. Lucille took charge of the kitchen for the rest of the day. These two women, and their husbands, made up two-thirds of the salaried staff. Teacher, Evelyn Watson, and housemother, Grace Moore, were the other two members. All had been there since the beginning, and each lived in private apartments on the premises. Gayle and Evelyn both were married, living with their husbands. Ted Morrison and Frank Dotson shared maintenance duties, including lawn care. Grace, being widowed, lived alone. Evelyn Watson had never married.

Gayle twisted around to grin broadly at Jude, then returned to whisking the eggs, her entire body a part of the action.

“And you know it!” Jude removed the lid from a full bottle of milk and placed it on the serving bar. “I wonder if Karen has interacted with everyone yet. Mama said she rested most of the weekend.” Jude began filling the remaining bowls with cereal, while Laverne set out glasses for the juice and milk.

“Yes, she ate some,” Laverne said. “A little.” The fact that Laverne felt confident enough to speak encouraged Jude.

“How did she look? Was she feeling okay?”

“She looked awful beat up.” Her words sounded flat, without emotion, as Laverne continued with her chores. However, Jude was pleased with the progress Laverne had made, just over the weekend.

“I know, she looked bad on Friday.”

“I haven’t met her yet, she didn’t come to the dining room for breakfast or lunch, all weekend,” Gayle said, carrying a stack of empty trays to the serving bar. “That’s the down side of not being here all day, miss the late arrivals.”

“Well, you can always stay, you know!” Jude teased.

“I would if my knees would let me, but by two o’clock, I just can’t wait to prop up my feet, and you know I can’t miss my soap operas! Oops, almost forgot about the biscuits!” She grabbed a mitt, and opened one of the oven doors.

“I’ll go check on Karen, and the kids, before everyone comes in,” Jude said, being of no more use in the kitchen. “Be right back.”

She hurried down the wide corridor leading to the north wing, which housed three separate suites of rooms for the women with children. Jude had planned the interior design for the entire house, but she most enjoyed the work done in the north wing, for she loved designing for children. Since Karen had three, she had been placed in the apartment with two bedrooms. Jude had patterned this particular suite after the first rooms she had ever designed: Edie’s, her younger sister, and Jude’s own room, which she shared with her son, Davy, at her parents’ house in Oak Cliff. Now six, Davy wanted a room of his own, so she had added a new project to her long list.

She opened her interior decorating business last year. CDC, Inc.—Caliber Development and Construction—had been her first client, and remained her most important one. With all the new motels, shopping centers, and housing developments, designed and constructed by her stepfather, Max, and his company, she quickly had become overwhelmed. She realized that she needed a partner, a staff, and a real office in a commercial location—not the upstairs apartment at home which had become her temporary workplace. She kept most of her samples and other related materials there and sometimes used the apartment to meet with clients. But she needed help.

She knew she must tackle the task of finding a partner immediately, someone with business sense, accounting knowledge, and presentation abilities, for in that area she realized her limitations quickly. She was also considering her own in-house crew of painters, paperhangers, and window treatment specialists, rather than sub-contracting the work out, as she had done from the beginning. *I will think about that tonight.* Charlie Percy’s face flashed across her mind, reminding her of their dinner date that evening, as she knocked on Karen’s door.

Four-year-old Lindy opened the door and peered up at Jude. Lindy was dressed, her hair neatly combed.

"Hello, there. Remember me?" Jude squatted to eye level with the precocious child.

"Yes," the little girl said, bobbing her head. "Mom-m-ma, somebody's here!"

"It's me, Jude. Thought I'd—"

"Oh, hi," Karen said, coming to the door, Sissy on her hip.

"Y'all ready for breakfast?"

"We were just waiting for the buzzer. Come on, J.J." Karen motioned with her free hand for her two-year-old son.

"I thought I'd walk to the dining room with you." Jude smiled at the young mother, relieved that most of the swelling was gone from her face; only a little discoloration remained around the stitches in her brow. "You look good, how is your shoulder?"

"I feel much better, thanks. A little uneasy about seeing everyone, but I know I cannot stay cooped up here, although it is a beautiful place. I am still in shock, the way me and the kids wound up here." She shook her head, her long ponytail swinging across her shoulders. "I can't believe it, clothes here for us, and everything." She looked down at the new skirt and blouse she had found in the closet. "I didn't think of bringing anything with us, when we left the house yesterday, all I could think about was leaving, getting help, before my husband came back." Her dark eyes probed Jude's, sending a silent message of confused gratitude. "All I grabbed was a couple of bottles for Sissy, and her diapers, and that was it!" She shifted Sissy a little. "I mean, what do I do about our clothes, our stuff? Everything we have in the world is at the house."

"I know. But, you're going to be fine, give yourself a couple more days. When you can use that shoulder, you'll feel better."

"I had no idea what would happen, when I went to the sheriff's office, and I was really in bad shape, wasn't thinking clearly at all,"

"You did exactly the right thing, Karen," Jude assured her, "And don't look back, think only about today, what you can do today for yourself and your kids." She laughed, raising her dark brows, and taking a deep breath. "That will give you plenty to do, and we will deal with tomorrow when it comes!" She smiled, and added, "You are safe, and we are here to help you."

Jude turned her attention to Lindy and J.J. "Have you kids been outside yet? It's a beautiful day."

"Go play?" J.J.'s blue eyes popped in excitement. "Momma, c'mon!" he begged, heading for the door. In the hallway the mealtime buzzer sounded.

"After breakfast, you can go play." Karen guided her children though the door behind Jude. Lindy and J.J. rushed down the hallway. "Wait, kids," their mother called. "Don't run."

"Hi, Sissy," Jude said, smiling at the adorable six-month-old baby. "You want to come to me?" Sissy clung to her mother, pushing coppery curls against the gauzy sling protecting the woman's injured shoulder. The baby focused on Jude's face in wide-eyed wonder. Jude held out her arms, and after a brief

hesitation, Sissy went to her, her head pulled back, her eyes staring directly into Jude's. Jude laughed, giving the padded bottom a couple of gentle pats.

Frances and Annette, from the other two suites, joined them as they walked down the hallway, along with their three children. Jude loved watching the children's eager interaction, their guilelessness, their innocence, so different from the adults who often held back, wary of each other, waiting for the other to make the first move. Not so with children.

Certainly not with the four new friends who walked side by side, like stair steps, holding hands, ready to go play! Although older, James and his sister, Millie—Annette's two—still shared a commonality with little Lindy and J.J., having only known them a couple of days. The resilience of the children who passed through *The Right Place* tugged at Jude's heart. Always seeing the little ones, the readiness with which they accepted the changes in their lives, encouraged Jude everyday

However, Rita, the thirteen-year-old daughter of Frances, displayed the reticence of some teenagers, not fitting in with the children, or the adults. She hung back, walked alone, behind the younger ones, but in front of the women. Watching Rita, the slump in her thin shoulders, the limpness of her dark hair, reminded Jude so much of herself at that age, and she cringed inwardly thinking of all that may have befallen the girl already. It was especially for the Ritas of this world, that Judith came every day.